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# **Inculturating the vincentian charism**

## **Vows and virtues in the congregation of the mission**

*P. Hugh O'Donnell, C.M.*  
*Visitor of Taiwan*

Two recent documents reached a new level of appreciation for the meaning and power of the vows in the Congregation of the Mission and in the Church. They are: *Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission* (1996) and the *Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life* (1996). Neither, however, is inculturated, unless we consider the world in which documents are written to have a culture of its own. Both documents have benefitted from the unreflexive inculturation coming through the consultation process. Otherwise, the inculturation of the vows - and the virtues - are left to the provincial, local and personal levels.

**Transfiguration.** Pope John Paul II uses the transfiguration of Jesus as the model of the consecrated life. It is a very effective image. I suggest it is equally effective as an image of the inculturation which is the fruit of radically living the vows and virtues among the people. In the transfiguration of Jesus the entire human existence of Jesus is transfused with the glory of God. Through our vows the interior light and energy flowing from God's love is embodied in our radical missionary commitment, and it is seen, felt and experienced by others. The radiance and glory of the transfiguration owe more to eastern theology than to the west, though their recovery is truly scriptural.

**My approach.** My approach follows Shorter's distinction between acculturation and inculturation. Acculturation is the gradual and often disorienting experience of becoming at home in another culture. Inculturation is the fruit of conscious and free interaction between two different cultures. Briefly it is the fruit of a dialogue that is most often neither structured nor reflexive. In our case the dialogue could involve a religious culture either of the church or the Vincentian community, or both, in dialogue with the civil or popular culture in which we live, work and preach the gospel.

I have also decided not to deal with the impact of culture upon our vows. Rather I have approached the vows and virtues of the missionary as the **ground of our freedom**, freedom to be transformed, transfigured, changed in the exchange between the meanings and values of the gospel and those of the culture we live in.

**Passing over and passing back.** John Dunne in all his books offers an image and method that captures the dynamic of cross-cultural exchange - or dialogue - leading to awareness, challenge, enrichment and often transfiguration. He calls it **passing over and passing back**. He passes over empathetically and experientially into the world of the other, for example, in *The House of Wisdom*, into the world of Moslem faith as he visits La Sophia in Istanbul. Over the course of a few weeks he began to experience the absolute religious power of the non-Trinitarian One God Allah. From that experience he returned to

the radical communion he experienced in his Trinitarian world of Father, Son and Spirit. In the passing over and passing back he is changed in his feelings and in his perceptions. Whether intentionally or intuitively this seems to be the dynamic of inculturation.

From this perspective inculturation is a great gift, because it honors differences and leads to a new and deeper unity between the confreres and the people. Appreciation for differences leads to mutual respect, dialogue and communion. The opposite is also true: unity differentiates. Our own identity is deepened and enhanced through communion.

**Conditions for inter-cultural exchange.** Among the attitudes and conditions required for passing over and passing back, I believe the following five can guide us..

**Reverence and respect.** The empathy required for understanding and appreciating the values and meanings of the other culture calls for reverence and respect, which hopefully can be felt by the others. Moses took off his shoes because the ground was sacred.

**Listening first.** Pope Paul VI in *Ecclesiam suam* gave high priority to listening as the principal way of entering into the world of the other.

**A true sense of our own identity.** The inculturation of our charism calls for a true sense of who we are as Vincentian missionaries and what we are about. What are our gifts? . . . our liabilities? . . . our hopes? . . . our mission? Being aware of our own identity is basic to passing over freely and reverently into the world of the other.

**Face the differences.** Avoidance of differences leads to anemic inculturation. It is on the basis of acknowledging the differences between us, being willing to share them and talk about them in a spirit of truth that deep inculturation can happen.

**Glad to be here.** The process of inculturation has a great deal to do with feeling. If the people feel we are glad to be among them and to be with them, the door to passing over and passing back will be open.

**Two rules from China.** One of our confreres in China Mainland one day told me the two rules to be followed by outsiders going to China. This confrere was in the novitiate in 1949 when the Communist army came to Beijing. He was arrested and spent the next thirty years in prison or some other form of compulsory service. When he was released, he was ordained privately in his home and shortly after was ordained publicly in the official church. I witnessed the wonderful work he has done in one of the seminaries of the mainland. It was easy to see he was a true father to the seminarians and the young priests. Based on his long experience in China he gave me these two rules: **mention only the good things** (don't come as a critic) and **come as a brother** (not as a benefactor). These rules will go a long way to a deeper exchange leading to inculturation.

**Two worlds: East and West.** The scale of values of China and generally Asia are the inverse of Western, or, at least, North American values. In the West law is primacy, followed by reason and then relationships. In the Orient relationships are primary, followed

by reason, then law. When relationships are harmonious or in order, then much can be done in China. When they are not, little can be accomplished and Western appeal to argument or law has little meaning in advancing understanding and cooperation.

**Stability: evangelizare pauperibus.** There is promise for a deep and significant exchange between the Church/the Vincentians and China concern our vocation to evangelize the poor in at least two areas. The first concerns the poor. Two-thirds of present day China is made up of peasants and farmers who are the rural poor. They remind us of our roots and challenge us to enter their world. But, what do we know of their world and what do we know about what it feels like to belong to the peasantry today? Regardless, we are dreaming of preparing confreres for this mission.

The second concerns the value placed on ethical truth. How can the Gospel's proclamation of Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life be brought into relationship to the scholarly tradition of intelligence and morality based on the five relationships of Confucius? In this regard, there has been an astonishing development in the past ten years. Chinese intellectuals have begun to take a deep interest in Christianity as a system of meanings and values within a philosophy of history that is rooted in the past and open to the future. They do not yet seem to be open to the Gospel as a religious relationship to God. They are called "cultural Christians." It is at this level that the Gospel and Vincentian charism must be inculturated to touch the soul of China deeply and widely. Will we prepare ourselves to enter into this intellectual conversation?

**Stability: toto vitae tempore.** Chinese culture strengthens and reinforces the values found in this part of the vow. In China people take the long view of things and have a sense that time is on their side. They have wonderful patience. They can wait a year, a decade or a century, because they know someday Taiwan will be again united with China. They remind me of Vincent's dictum: firm regarding the end, flexible and gentle regarding the means. To live in a culture that honors perseverance and patience, especially in the face of adversity and suffering, is a great grace for the Gospel and our lives. We are now beginning to make a long-term investment in personnel for the future of the mission in China. If we cannot enter, those who come after us will.

When visiting China Mainland I asked the confreres who had spent twenty or thirty years in prison or in labor camps what kept them going. They seemed a little surprised and then said "Faith," "God," "My companions." What's remarkable about them is that there is no bitterness in them. They seem not to have taken it personally in a manner of speaking. They sense themselves rooted in a tradition larger than themselves.

**Chastity.** A Chinese student that I know became a Catholic fifteen or twenty years ago and later went to the seminary and was ordained. His family, who are Buddhist and for many generations Taiwanese farmers, could neither understand nor accept his decision. That he became a Catholic was not such a big problem nor even that he became a priest. What they found impossible to understand was that he could not have children. It is a fundamental value to them to have progeny and continue in line with their ancestors. To break this flow from generation to generation was inconceivable to them. This connection with ancestors, according to one long time missionary, reveals the deepest level of the religious spirit in the Chinese.

On days when spiritual values seem far away or unreal, this felt conviction about the importance of children and family continuity has a powerful appeal. In this context it is a strong challenge to me to reach down to depths of my own celibate commitment to call forth my vocation to fatherhood through which I transmit a new birth in the Spirit to people I come to cherish as sons and daughters. Celibacy also makes us loving members of a large family of brothers and sisters by calling us to be brothers in the footsteps of Jesus.

On this question of the relationship of family to our vocation, the life of Vincent gives us something to meditate on. He found in his experience that zealous priests, if they became involved in the affairs of their families, often lost their fire and their zeal. This is why he hesitated to return home in 1623, after a 23 year absence. When he did, he discovered how much his father's mission to help the family was still in his heart, and how much his family was still part of his life. Only the bitter tears of the following three months cleansed his heart and reoriented his emotions.

**Poverty.** The Chinese appreciate money (chyan) and things (dungsyi) and have none of the Western ambivalence toward either, though the feeling that these words and realities evoke seem different than the English equivalents. Evangelical poverty does not seem to be a value, but being poor also is not a disgrace or sign of divine disregard, à la Calvin. The Chinese, in my observation, can do the humblest task without any sense of a loss of dignity or reflection upon their self-worth. The Chinese, when they have money, can be very generous without any regard for who is sponsoring a particular work. For example, so many Buddhists and people of no particular faith at all contribute substantially to the care of the children with handicaps in Saint Anne's Home, next door to where I live.

I have not discovered the cultural interface for evangelical and missionary poverty yet, except to say that there is great freedom in being willing to eat whatever is set before us wherever we go in China and in sleeping in whatever spot their hospitality provides. When the Daughters of Charity were first re-contacted in China, after a gap of thirty-five years, they insisted on contributing some money for the journey of Sister Emma Lee who found them, though they had little and she had enough. The evangelical simplicity to receive the gifts of the poor, may be the greatest exercise of evangelical poverty.

**Obedience.** The Chinese have lived under emperors and local chieftains and officials for their whole history. Obedience to these authorities is taken for granted. At the same time, there is often a way around any situation: *you banfa*. There are many interesting lessons in flexible obedience to be learned from the Chinese. The relationship between the Church and Beijing is essentially one of authority or rather conflicting authorities. The church people who are making the most progress and finding fruitful opportunities in the mainland to do formation, for example, are the ones who succeed in establishing **trustful human relationships** with the local and national authorities. If we have a wound around the question of authority that has not been healed by the practice of the vow or virtue of obedience, then these relationships will be continually exposed to suspicion and distrust. The freedom that comes from evangelical obedience will be a great missionary asset in relating to the authorities in China and discovering or creating a way forward.

**The Vincentian Virtues.** The Chinese, I think, cherish from their own tradition the five virtues of humility, simplicity, meekness, mortification and zeal. These are marks of a genuine and authentic person. This perhaps deserves a separate paper.

**A final word.** The people of China, in the opinion of many, have never been more open to Christianity than they are today. The churches have grown exponentially. Their regard for Christianity is at three distinct levels: as a philosophy of life (a set of meanings), as a way of life (an ethical system) and as a religion (a relationship to God). The vows and virtues can give us the radical openness, freedom from cultural imperialism and courage for exchange that will lead to a profound inculturation of the Gospel in Chinese culture.